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THE RELIGIOUS AND SOCIAL IDEALS OF ISRAEL. VII

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STUDY VII

ZEPHANIAH, NAHUM, HABAKKUK, AND OBADIAH: THE ANSWER OF THE PROPHETS TO THE QUESTION, WHAT IS GOD'S PART IN HISTORY?

Contemporaneous with various portions of the long ministry of Jeremiah, which continued from 627 B.C. until after the fall of Jerusalem in 586 B.C., there were four prophets who spoke on various phases of the national life, particularly in regard to the problems arising out of Judah's relation to her neighbors. These are the ones whose work is reviewed in this study.

No reference to these men is made by Jeremiah in any surviving oracle of his; nor do any of the four prophets mention their great contemporary. Yet this does not appear strange when one reflects upon the large amount of spoken and written prophecy which has not survived to our day, and the variety of interests, religious, ethical, social, and political, which engaged the attention of these moral leaders.

In reading these four brief books, one notices the almost total absence of the social solicitude which has occupied so large a place in the work of the preachers whose ministries have been studied thus far. It is not with ethical, hardly even with religious, themes that these men are engaged, save as these values are implicit in the national problems of their day. It is rather with Judah's political fortunes, as they are affected by the surrounding peoples, the Scythians, the Assyrians, the Babylonians, and the Edomites, that the prophets of this order concern themselves.

Is it for this reason that less of their material has survived? Were the great social teachings of men like Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Micah, and Jeremiah regarded as of larger value, and so preserved in fuller volume? Be that as it may, these less conspicuous champions of the national life of Judah are most valuable sources for the study of her problems and sentiments, and the intensity of their political faith and loyalty are notable commentaries upon that persistent belief in the providential issue of Israel's life, the results of which are witnessed in their later history, and in the religious experiences of the world.

First day.—§158. *The terrible threat of destruction:* Zeph. 1:1-6; Jer., chaps. 4, 6; II Kings, chaps. 21, 23. Read the Zephaniah passage, and observe in

vs. 1 the long genealogy, unusual in the case of prophets, and its termination in Hezekiah, presumably the royal great-grandfather of Josiah. Note also the date, probably about 627 B.C. In vss. 2-6 note the prediction of overwhelming destruction about to come upon all living things. Would it seem reasonable that the prophet here has in mind the terror of the Scythian invasion, to which Jeremiah seems to refer in chaps. 4, 6? Glance through the records of Manasseh's reign in II Kings, chaps. 21, 23, for references to the same forms of idolatry mentioned in these verses. It is upon idolaters that destruction is to fall.

Second day.—§ 159. *The day of Jehovah:* Zeph. 1:7-13. Read the passage, and notice the announcement of the approaching "day of Jehovah," probably connected in the prophet's mind with the Scythian devastation, but not exhausted by it. Note the classes who shall suffer in this visitation: the members of the royal family, those who practice superstitious rites, the violent, and the fraudulent. All parts of the city shall suffer. The secrets of fraud and selfishness shall be searched out.

Third day.—§ 160. "*Dies irae, dies illa*": Zeph. 1:14-18; Matt. 25:31-46. Read the Zephaniah passage, and observe the solemn character of the announcement that the day of wrath is near. This passage made a deep impression upon later Jewish and Christian thought. It seems to serve as one of the early bases for the doctrine of the Day of Judgment, which plays so important a part in the theology of the church. A mediaeval hymn, by Thomas of Celano, bears the title given above, and is the classic hymn on the subject. Compare the picture here given with that presented by Jesus in Matt. 25:31-46.

Fourth day.—§ 161. *Philistia's peril:* Zeph. 2:1-7; I Sam., chaps. 4-7, 13, 14, 31. Read the Zephaniah text, and note the explicit references to the doom that is to befall Israel's ancient oppressors, the Philistines. For records of the depredations wrought by them, glance through I Sam., chaps. 4-7, 13, 14, 31. Where was Philistia, and what were its cities? Would the fact that the Philistines were directly in the path of the advancing Scythians give point to the prophet's word? Note that vs. 3 seems to be a later and interpolated reference to the people of Jehovah.

Fifth day.—§ 162. *The doom of Ammon and Moab.* Zeph. 2:8-11; Amos, chaps. 1, 2. Read the passage from Zephaniah and notice that it deals with two peoples east of the Jordan, and quite out of the path of the Scythians. For this reason, and further because of the intensity of the national hostility manifested, and the remoter issues of vs. 11, the entire passage is regarded by many as later than the times of Zephaniah. It reflects, however, the antagonism felt toward the two trans-Jordanic tribes. Compare the spirit of this passage with that of Amos, chaps. 1, 2.

Sixth day.—§ 163. *Ethiopia and Assyria:* Zeph. 2:12-15. Read the passage, and note that it refers to the two nations who had been the outstanding rulers of the world, west and east. The Ethiopians ruled Egypt for a half-century shortly before Zephaniah's time; and Egypt was the southern goal of the Scythian raid. Assyria, the great empire between the Tigris and Euphrates, had Nineveh for its capital. That empire fell before the Medes and Babylonians in 606 B.C. But Zephaniah may well have believed that the wild Scythian horsemen would be the cause of its overthrow. (As we shall soon see,

the Book of Nahum, especially chaps. 2, 3, is the classic prophecy of the downfall of Nineveh.)

Seventh day.—§ 164. *Jerusalem the unholy:* Zeph 3:1-5. Read the passage, noting that it is one of the few sections in these books that has the ring of sympathy with the victims of social injustice. There is much the same tone as in the contemporary words of Jeremiah in the period before the great reformation of Josiah. What are the sins charged against Jerusalem? (Vss. 6, 7 seem unrelated to their context, and are probably of later date.)

Eighth day.—§ 165. *The purification of Judah:* Zeph. 3:8-13. Read the text, and note that in it Jehovah promises his people that he will punish the nations that have wasted them; yet with milder spirit he affirms that he will speak persuasively to the peoples, and they shall turn to him. The holy nation shall be gathered home from the distant lands, and purified of its evil elements. The humbled remnant shall dwell pure and protected. The tone of the entire passage is post-exilic.

Ninth day.—§ 166. *The Golden Age to come:* Zeph. 3:14-20. Read the passage, and note that it is either the utterance of an age when danger no more menaces Jerusalem, or the prophet in his confidence places himself in that ideal future. Jehovah is the national deliverer. The true Israel rejoices, fearless and triumphant, the humble are upraised, and the proud driven away. And Israel becomes the glory of the nations.

Tenth day.—§ 167. *The mighty God:* Nah. 1:1-10. Read the passage, and note that vs. 1 gives the theme of the book, and the name and residence of the prophet. The entire book is devoted to the approaching doom of Nineveh. Nothing is known of Nahum aside from the book, and Elkosh is an unknown place. Vss. 2-10 in the original are an acrostic, the lines beginning with the successive letters of the alphabet. For this reason, as well as their indefinite and apocalyptic character, they are thought to be later than the body of the work in chaps. 2 and 3, and put in as a general introduction. What is the theme of these verses?

Eleventh day.—§ 168. *Comfort and threatening.* Nah. 1:11-15. Read the passage, and notice the evidence of two entirely different themes: vss. 11 and 14 addressed apparently to Nineveh, and constituting probably the first authentic words of Nahum in condemnation of the heathen city; vss. 12, 13, and 15, wholly different in tone, and evidently part of an oracle of comfort to Judah, perhaps based upon the doom of Nineveh.

Twelfth day.—§ 169. *The siege of Nineveh:* Nah. 2:1-5. Read the passage, and note the vividness of the picture of Nineveh's distress and overthrow. Ironically the prophet bids the mighty capital defend itself. Then he describes the desperate efforts made in attack and defense. The armed chariots rush to and fro, the commanders are exhorted to the charge, and protections are set up. The student will not fail to notice the realism of the description.

Thirteenth day.—§ 170. *The den of lions:* Nah. 2:6-13. Read the passage, and notice that in some unknown manner the waters of the Tigris played a part in the overthrow of the city. The queen, or the goddess, or the personified city, is stripped and carried away, amid the mourning of her maidens. Like a pool her people melt away. Enormous plunder is taken away, and so the city that was lion-like in its power, vanishes forever from the earth.

Fourteenth day.—§ 171. *The bloody city:* Nah. 3:1-7. Read the passage, and note how in verse after verse the prophet pursues the theme of Nineveh's overthrow. As the most hated of the oppressors of Israel, her destruction was an immeasurable relief. The career of Assyria had been one of almost uninterrupted triumph. Her power had been felt in all the earth. But she is soon to be punished for her cruelty, her pride, and her seductive idolatries. To the astonishment of all men, she is now to be laid waste.

Fifteenth day.—§ 172. *Nineveh shall fall like Thebes:* Nah. 3:8-19. Read the passage, and observe that it refers to the capture of Thebes (No-Amon), the capital of Upper Egypt, by Ashurbanipal in 661 B.C. This reference, and the fact that the fall of Nineveh, the prophetic theme of Nahum, occurred in 606 B.C., set the limits within which the book must have been written. The precise date was probably about 608 B.C. The prophet declares that a fate like that of Thebes shall in turn befall Nineveh. Again in ironical language he summons her people to defend themselves. Numberless leaders and countless wealth cannot save them. Their guardians are helpless and her fate is sealed, and thus, with a satisfaction that makes evident the bitterness of Hebrew hatred of Assyria, the prophet brings his taunt to a close. What do you think of the spirit of this book? How do you think it compares with Amos or Micah?

Sixteenth day.—§ 173. *The prophet's perplexity, and the divine answer:* Hab. 1:1-11; II Kings 23:36-24:17. Read the Habakkuk passage, and note that vs. 1 is the superscription, which tells us all we know of Habakkuk; that vss. 2-4 give the perplexed comment of the prophet upon the lawlessness and social injustice of the times, which would seem to correspond to the reign of Jehoiakim, probably its latter period, between the battle of Carchemish (605 B.C.) and the first siege of Jerusalem (597 B.C.); and that vss. 5-11 provide the divine response, to the effect that God is raising up the fierce Babylonians (Chaldeans) as the instrument for the punishment of the oppressive and wicked in Judah. Read II Kings 23:36-24:17 for references to the military operations of the Babylonians in Palestine.

Seventeenth day.—§ 174. *A deeper perplexity:* Hab. 1:12-17. Read the passage, and observe that the visitation of the Babylonians, predicted in vss. 5-11, has evidently taken place. The oracle is therefore later than the previous one, and doubtless belongs after the siege of 597 B.C. A fresh and more disquieting perplexity now disturbs the prophet. Why does God permit such merciless treatment of Judah at the hands of these heathen? The hand of Assyria was heavy; but that of Babylonia is heavier still. It is the embodiment of mere crushing brute force, delighting in malice and self-glorification. Why does Jehovah, the ever-loving God, allow such miseries to be inflicted on his people? Do you think these words find echo in the hearts of many of the war-distressed people of today?

Eighteenth day.—§ 175. *The divine response:* Hab. 2:1-5; Gal. 3:11. Read the Habakkuk passage, and note that with dramatic impressiveness it gives the divine oracle in answer to the perplexed question of vss. 12-17 above. Observe that in vs. 1 the prophet figuratively withdraws to his tower of observation and silence, to wait for the divine word. Note also that vs. 2 gives Jehovah's preliminary direction to write down upon clay tablets, after the Babylonian manner,

the oracle now to be given, so that it will be readable and permanent. Then vs. 3 brings assurance that the oracle pertains to days ahead, but not far distant, and is to be waited for in confidence. Then in vs. 4 comes the divine word at last: "All that you say of the oppressor is true; but the righteous shall live by his (or my) faithfulness," by trust in God and unwavering loyalty to his will. Note Paul's use of this oracle in Gal 3:11, and in his entire discussion of justification by faith in the epistles to the Galatians and Romans. How does his use of the words differ from the prophet's? To what degree do you think the oracle would be a comfort to the people of Judah? Note that vs. 5 amplifies the description of the Babylonian oppressor.

Nineteenth day.—§ 176. *The fivefold woe:* Hab. 2:6-20. Read the passage, and note that it contains five "woes," presumably uttered against the foes referred to in the previous verses. But notice also that these maledictions are somewhat general in their character, and might be used in any denunciation of oppression, cruel ambition, injustice, drunkenness, violence, or idolatry. Perhaps they belong to a later period than that of the prophet. Is there evidence of greater social concern in Habakkuk than in Zephaniah and Nahum? Observe the quotations in vs. 12 from Mic. 3:10; in vs. 13 from Jer. 51:58; and in vs. 14 from Isa. 11:9.

Twentieth day.—§ 177. *The manifestation of God:* Hab. 3:1-15; Deut. 33:2; Ps. 77:16-20; Judg. 5:4, 5. Read the Habakkuk passage, and note that it has the form of a psalm, uses the musical notation "on stringed instruments" at the opening and the close, and twice employs the pausal direction "Selah," which appears elsewhere only in the Psalms. Read also Deut. 33:2, and compare it with vs. 3; and compare Ps. 77:16-20 with vss. 10, 11, 15. It is a demand for the appearance of God in vengeance on the enemies of Judah, and a figurative description of such an event, based on Judg. 5:4, 5 and the passages already cited. Would such a picture of divine power be a comfort to the afflicted in Judah and in exile?

Twenty-first day.—§ 178. *Jehovah is the strength of his people:* Hab. 3:16-19; II Sam. 22:34; Ps. 18:33. Read the Habakkuk passage, and observe that it is the psalmist's meditation upon the manifestation of Jehovah of vss. 3-15. The first effect is terror, but confidence in God brings joy and strength. Read II Sam. 22:34 and Ps. 18:33, and compare with vs. 19. The relation of chap. 3 to chaps. 1, 2, is not intimate, and it may come from a much later age. Its note is that of the intense nationalism which appears in the prophets of this group.

Twenty-second day.—§ 179. *The oracle against Edom:* Obad. 1-9; Jer. 49:7-22; Mal. 1:2-5; Gen. 25:19-34. Read the Obadiah passage, and compare it with Jer. 49:7-22. Does it not seem probable that Obadiah had before him the older oracle of Jeremiah, and was partly quoting, and partly commenting upon it? Recall the fact that Edom was the race of Esau, living south of the Dead Sea, in the rocky defiles where later the rock city of Petra was constructed. Throughout their history there had been bitter hostility between Judah and the Edomites. Note that in vss. 1-4 the prophet recalls the older oracle against Edom, and in vss. 5-7 comments on a calamity that has recently befallen that people, perhaps attacks of Arabians or Nabateans from the desert, which drove them out of their

rocky fastnesses northward. Read also Mal. 1:2-5, and consider the probability that these words refer to the same spoiling of Edom. In vss. 8, 9 the influence of the Jeremiah passage is again seen. Read Gen. 25:19-34 for the early story of Jacob and Esau.

Twenty-third day.—§ 180. *The crime of Edom:* Obad. 10-14; II Kings 24:18-25:11; Ps. 137:7-9. Read the Obadiah passage, and note that it seems to refer to the conduct of the Edomites at the time of Jerusalem's destruction by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 B.C. The words, probably written long afterward, recall in terms of warning the hostile behavior of Edom in that time of agony for Jerusalem. Read again, II Kings 24:18-25:11, the story of the capture of Jerusalem. No mention of the Edomites is there made, but the prophets supplied the lacking details. Read Psalm 137:7-9, and notice how the Edomites and Babylonians are linked together in that terrible cry for vengeance upon the enemies of Jerusalem.

Twenty-fourth day.—§ 181. *The day of Jehovah upon Edom:* Obad. 15-21; Isa. 63:1-6. Read the Obadiah passage, and note that it is more general in tone, and would seem to be a sort of appendix, probably much later in date. It affirms the coming of the "day of Jehovah"—the time of judgment—upon all the nations, but especially upon Edom. It recalls the Edomite revels on Mt. Zion and predicts that in the future the restored Judah will consume Edom. The sections of Palestine that have been occupied by clans like the Edomites and the Philistines shall be reoccupied by the people of Judah returning from exile. This hope of a future reckoning with Edom seems to have been persistent through the history. Read Isa. 63:1-6, and see how a prophet living in the post-exilic days looked longingly forward to the time when Israel's ideal warrior, the messianic king, would come to his people with his garments drenched in the blood of Edom. In such passages the strong nationalistic spirit has its fullest expression.

Twenty-fifth day.—*The Book of Zephaniah.* Review the Book of Zephaniah, and recall that it appears to have as its background an expected calamity, which is about to befall Judah and its neighbors. Remember that this has been thought to be the great Scythian raid of 627 B.C., in the reign of Josiah, from which, fortunately, Judah escaped. But both Jeremiah and Zephaniah used the event to emphasize their call to repentance. Notice that this prophet is concerned to warn Jerusalem regarding the impending danger, which he calls the "day of Jehovah." His is the spirit of deep national solicitude, but it is based on desire to see the people repent of their false worship, their foreign customs, and their disregard of Jehovah. *Is the prophet right in believing that righteousness is the best protection against outward dangers?*

Twenty-sixth day.—*The Book of Nahum.* Read the book again, and notice that, as in Zephaniah, its interest is not in the judgment upon Judah, but in the fall of Assyria, her great enemy. It is one of the most vivid and picturesque of the prophetic works. It probably dates from about 608 B.C., a short time before the fall of Nineveh. The description of the siege and fall of Nineveh is full of life and color. But it is nationalistic in the external and political sense. Zephaniah also looked forward to the destruction of Assyria, but was more concerned with the punishment to be inflicted on Jerusalem. Nahum is absorbed in the sentiment of triumph over the approaching fall of the great persecutor of his

people. How would you estimate the two types of nationalism? Which would have most value for the moral life of a nation? Is the sentiment of nationalism as contrasted with internationalism increasing or declining?

Twenty-seventh day.—The Book of Habakkuk. Read the book again, considering once more the perplexity of the prophet over the violence and wrongdoing in the land, and the divine response that soon there shall come discipline at the hands of the Babylonians (Chaldeans). This portion of the book seems to date from the troubled reign of Jehoiakim, about 600 B.C. Later the prophet, astonished and distressed at the ferocity of these insolent invaders, raises the question as to how God can permit a people far more evil than Judah herself, and more merciless than her former oppressors, the Assyrians, to bring this desolation upon the land. The answer is the oracle, that faithfulness is the secret of survival. Is this a permanent principle of national life? This portion of the prophecy, and the woes that follow, seem to emerge from the period following the fall of Jerusalem. The final chapter is a psalm in celebration of the power of God. This book possesses the national spirit to a marked degree. Like the others of the group, it is less concerned with moral and social problems than with the prospects of Judah.

Twenty-eighth day.—The Book of Obadiah. Read the book, the briefest in the Old Testament, and note that it has a single and simple theme, a denunciation of Edom, a shout of exultation over the troubles coming upon her, and a prediction of more disastrous days ahead. The intensity of national resentment against the foes of Judah reaches its climax in this book. No concern is evinced for the moral or religious advance of the prophet's own people, but only for vengeance upon their enemies. Yet such a spirit is true to the life of an ancient people, and has not, even in this age, died out of the human heart. Are such books useful for instruction, or for warning? Is this the type of patriotism the world most needs?

Twenty-ninth day.—Judah and the nations. In all the studies of this course, it has been apparent that one of the most important elements in the social, political, and religious life of Israel was the influence of the neighboring nations upon her. It is too late in the centuries to attempt the study of Old Testament history and religion without careful attention to the peoples who constituted the environment of Hebrew life. In the present study the significance of these surrounding influences is more than ever apparent. The chief concern of these four prophets was the effect of Scythian, Assyrian, Babylonian, and Edomite behavior upon the fortunes of Judah. By such means the scope of national thought was widened, and the conception of Jehovah as a world-ruler was strengthened. But was there any solicitude as to the influence Israel ought to exert upon her neighbors?

Thirtieth day.—The national spirit. The hardships which Israel suffered at the hands of the neighboring peoples did much to intensify the feeling of devotion to the land, and to its history. No nation that has not suffered for the sake of its possessions and institutions can realize their value. Yet is it not true that national life is largely the result of geographical conditions? Why should Europe be broken up into many hostile and suspicious nations, while the American states have no such jealousies and antagonisms? Is the love of humanity of a higher order

than the love of country? What effect would such considerations have upon the continuance of war?

Thirty-first day.—Present value of this group of prophets. Noting the prevalence of national over ethical, social, and religious concern in these prophets, are they to be counted as of the same value as Amos, Isaiah, and Micah? How far is it probable that they expressed the spirit of the prophets just named? How far would Jesus approve of the spirit of these books? Would you call Jesus a nationalist in any sense? Would you think of him as a patriot? In what way would the prevalence of his ideas prevent international jealousy and war? Is America fortunately situated to interpret to the other nations the ethics of Jesus on this theme?

SUGGESTIONS TO LEADERS OF CLASSES USING THE FOREGOING COURSE

BY GEORGIA L. CHAMBERLIN

INTRODUCTORY

In the study of the prophets which will form the basis of our work for the present month, it will be necessary to guard the group against the prevalent feeling that whatever is in the Bible is good just because it is there. At least two of the prophets whose speeches we are to study were consumed with wrath—righteous perhaps, but quite as disastrous to the spiritual quality of the men who spoke as to their hearers. It would not be fair in a study of the Hebrew prophets, however, to omit these books, for the men who spoke these wrathful words represented the Hebrew people more truly than the prophets of social justice and pure religion. It will be seen, however, that the preparation of programs upon such a group of books as these is more difficult than in the case of those books where there are many events and striking occasions to be discussed. Perhaps the strongest lessons which can be drawn from Old Testament prophecy in this group are those of the cultivation of high ideals of international relationships, of the impossibility of a nation living in isolation, and of the constant passing back and forth of influences which change and develop the character of a nation.

PROGRAM I

1. The Scythian invasion and a review of Jeremiah's message to Judah at that time. 2. Zephaniah and his message in the same crisis. 3. The "day of Jehovah" as depicted by the prophets before the exile. 4. Zephaniah's philosophy of the nations surrounding Judah.

Discussion: If the Jews had been less exclusive religiously, would they have had a larger influence on the world in ancient as well as modern times?

PROGRAM II

A series of speeches from the prophetic books, by members of the club, in each case preceded by a statement of the historical background which makes the